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ABSTRACT

Three points are basic to communicative teaching. First, we do not know how language is learned and so cannot follow rigidly any one procedure in teaching a language. Secondly, teaching is not the obverse of learning. Teaching can be controlled, and the relationship between teachers and learners is more than simple input leading to output. Third, language use is dynamic, an interaction between persons; its use necessitates negotiating agreed cultural values. The teacher can provide the "tokens" of the language, but learners themselves must learn to use it, to adapt it to situations they have not chosen themselves, to say what they have not been explicitly taught to say. To respond to a learner's need to use language in natural situations, teachers must develop group-work techniques, create an environment and situations in which students can be free to use the basic patterns and vocabulary they have learned in ways they use their native language. With regard to syllabus, any syllabus can become communicative with a methodology that promotes dynamic language activity. The advantage of a notional-functional syllabus is that it requires the teacher to become sensitive to the range of things to be done in the foreign language and familiar with settings in which students could use the language they are learning. (AMH)

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Some Current Problems in Communicative Language Teaching: Opening Speech to SPEAQ Convention, Quebec City, June 2 1982

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When I was invited to speak at this convention I was particularly asked to address myself to this topic. As a result, and in order to do it justice, I shall be summarising some points which I have made elsewhere, as well as extending the argument in directions which seem particularly important from the perspective of Canada in 1982. What is certainly true at the moment is that methodologists feel rather like those little electric blobs in the middle of space invader games, threatened from all sides by instant extermination as they are pulled in one direction by the demands for practical and immediate solutions to problems by the teaching profession, and assailed from the other by new communicative and humanistic proposals by applied linguists, materials developers and syllabus designers, or destroyers.

I propose, though, to speak about communicative teaching, without assuming that that will necessarily be functional-notional teaching, and to move from three base points to a teaching view of the learning process. I say a 'teaching' view because we are here at this convention in our capacities as teachers, because we are paid for what we do as teachers, and because any intervention we make in the activities of our students is made as a teacher. Consequently, however important it is for us to understand learners and learning, it is also important for us to understand the position from which we act professionally, and how it differs from that of the learner. I shall be moving, that is to say, towards a view of teaching methodology, not to a view of the language learning process or of the description of language, or classrooms, or communication.

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Because of this, I want to concentrate on being realistic – which means that what I have to say must be interpretable for normal schools as they have to operate in the world as it is, that I must make no claims which cannot be justified by our experience and intuitions about normal classroom possibilities, and that what I say must be perceived as comprehensible and relevant by normal classroom teachers – not only by the committed and excited who read journals, come to SPEAQ Conventions or only live for their profession. This may sound as if I am determined to fight with my hands tied behind my back, and indeed it will lead to some caution over the more extravagent possible statements, but there are good reasons for adopting this position. For one thing, innovations which only appeal to the most dedicated in the profession will probably only affect the most dedicated, and they are by definition a small minority; but more important, it is only the great mass of the teaching profession which can validate, by close contact day after day with typical classes, the speculations of those who think, write and speak from outside the classroom. It is sometimes helpful, with teaching methods as with language, to isolate the discussion from specific social situations, but proposals for effective teaching must rely heavily on feedback mechanisms which can only come from typical students in typical schools with typical teachers.

Nor will this orientation lead simply to caution and care. It may lead to something which is, in the present atmosphere, rather daring: the recognition of teachers' professional expertise, derived from experience and tradition, as being a major contribution to our understanding of teaching, and not something to be seen merely as a reactionary impediment to innovation and creative thinking. We need teachers' experience and intuition, so long as it is allied with knowledge of possible options and contact with imaginative research. Any successful innovation must depend on a combination of all these.

Let me now consider the three base points for our discussion of language teaching.

Base Point One

We know less than we would like to about language and language learning.

If we were researchers, this fact should spur us to more creative hypothesis formation and consequent testing. But the purpose of language teaching is not to *understand* language and language learning, but to produce effective acquisition in others. Such understanding as we have of the processes of language learning must feed in to our professional activities, but we must recognise that people have taught languages, and learnt them, very effectively without having much understanding at all of how they are learnt, or by operating with extremely bizarre ideas about the processes involved (I met a very competent English speaker once who swore that the only formal learning she had done was reading the novels of George Eliot, unsimplified, with the aid of a dictionary). Just to give an illustration of what I mean by our lack of knowledge, let me instance a typical report of a research seminar. Last September the British Association for Applied Linguistics held a seminar on interpretative strategies in language learning – a central issue to communicative teaching – and isolated the following problems in the organisers' report: the differences between the ways in which researchers defined 'strategies'; how to distinguish interpretation and learning strategies; how to infer mental strategies from overt behaviour; and the need for a more integrated theory (BAAL Newsletter, no. 14, Spring 1982). The point about this is that it is typical – which is not to make any kind of criticism of research or researchers, but simply to draw attention to the constantly changing nature of our understanding of psychology, linguistics, the educational process, and so on. Teaching continues, but we cannot claim that it is in some sense a translation of our understanding of language learning, for its dynamic is a product of the process of interaction between teachers, students, institutions and the demands of society. My conclusions from Base Point One, then, are:

1. We cannot say with confidence that we know exactly how language is learnt, and we cannot rely on the expertise that derives from the potentially contributory disciplines, so

2. We cannot legitimately enforce teachers or students to follow a particular procedure on the basis of these disciplines as we lack sufficient authority in our understanding to be so intolerant.

Base Point Two

Teaching is not the obverse of learning.

This is a point that I have argued more fully elsewhere (Brumfit, 1981) and for an interesting semantic analysis of the various possible relationships (based on the sentence "The teacher taught the student English.") see Halliday, 1976. Apart from the fundamental difference that teaching is causative in intention, while learning is not, most of the differences proceed from the point that teaching is overt and visible, while learning is covert and hidden. Thus, teaching takes place in real time, and therefore in a linear fashion; it can therefore be planned; it is the product of conscious decision-making and effort, and therefore can be based on a syllabus; we can test whether the appropriate actions are being performed, and thus produce "professionals"; these actions can be administratively interfered with; and its effectiveness cannot be measured – because we can never know in normal situations whether it was the teaching or something else that caused the changes in the learner. In contrast, learning may occur willingly or unwillingly; it may be linear but it may happen in an instantaneous flash of inspiration; it cannot usually be planned; it is often not the immediate result of conscious effort (How often do we complain, "The more I try the less I learn"?); it cannot be reliably based on a syllabus; the results can be tested, but not the process; learners do not constitute a profession; they are not administratively constrained; and the effectiveness of learning can be measured – by its results. This is a somewhat condensed account of a complicated series of distinctions, but the basic point should be clear. We can talk about teaching with some precision, because we can watch teaching happening – but we cannot, except with excessively over-simple models, watch learning happening at all. (None of this is to deny that learning may be influenced by accidental and casual encounters with teachers or others; however, teaching normally is a deliberate, and therefore self-aware attempt on the part of someone

to cause learning to take place in someone else.) Teaching is thus about making learning available, while learning is about successfully changing one's own behaviour. From a consideration of Base Point Two I conclude:

1. We can control teaching; we cannot control learning;
2. Therefore, we should not be ashamed of talking about teaching as a different phenomenon from learning;
3. We cannot specify the relationships between teachers and learners as being a simple matter of input, leading to output.

I would also, before moving on to the final base point, like to draw attention to one kind of understanding of teaching which can easily be neglected in the analysis of classrooms: direct participatory experience. Many social scientists have discussed the role of experience, and Winch has put the issue well:

> ... a historian or sociologist of religion must himself have some religious feeling if he is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the considerations which govern the lives of its participants. A historian of art must have some aesthetic sense if he is to understand the problems confronting the artists of his period; and without this he will have left out of his account precisely what would have made it a history of *art*, as opposed to a rather puzzling external account of certain motions which certain people have been perceived to go through. (Winch, 1958, p. 88)

"Talking about teaching" must take into account that pedagogic feeling which can only derive from extensive experience of teaching.

Base Point Three

Language use is dynamic, not static.

There has been a shift in our attitude to language in the last fifteen years or so which could constitute a genuine paradigm shift for language teaching. I do not need to spell it out in detail: those interested can pursue the discussion, in ascending order of difficulty, in Johnson and Morrow, 1981; Brumfit, 1980, Part Two; Widdowson, 1978; Johnson, 1982; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Canale and Swain, 1980; Widdowson, 1979.

The basic argument is that people do not *possess* language, they *use* it. Philosophers like Grice (1975) and social psychologists like Giles (1977) have suggested or observed some of the ways in which we do this. Sociolinguists like Labov (1972) have indicated how language varies in relation to social context. Linguists like Halliday (1973) have examined ways in which language structure and language function are inter-related. And language teaching theorists like van Ek (1975), Wilkins (1976) and Widdowson (1978) have attempted to incorporate many of these insights into specifications for syllabuses or materials. Essentially, language is seen as the creation of meaning by negotiation between speakers, or readers and writers. No two people will speak exactly the same dialect, but they will normally co-operate together to establish their purposes, the meanings of the language they use in relation to those purposes, and the amount of knowledge they share to enable them to achieve the purposes. They will communicate in this way by using the communication tokens that they share – linguistic and non-linguistic – and these tokens will clearly be more efficient when they are close to each other, that is when people speak similar dialects. There will also be fairly clearly established routines for performing common tasks of communication, so that negotiation is less between those who know each other well, or in stereotyped situations where the needs are highly predictable. Learning to mean, or learning to negotiate, is therefore not simply a matter of learning the tokens of the language, but how to use them as well. In some ways it is analogous to activities like swimming or driving, where the basic information for instruction is fairly simple, but a great deal of practice is necessary in interacting with water or traffic before we can be said to have learnt successfully. (And note that functional analyses are possible of both swimming and driving, but we do not use them in teaching the basic skills: what we do is provide a supportive environment and plenty of practice in situations which are less demanding than rough seas or rush-hour traffic.) From this view of the nature of language I conclude:

1. We are teaching people to *do* something, not to describe or understand it (this is of course a favourite audiolingual premise);
2. Comparisons with, for example, music are only partially valid – drilled routines may have a place, but language is essentially an interaction with other people who are themselves inter-

acting and is more like learning to play duets than learning to play the piano;

3. Using language must necessitate negotiating agreed cultural values (a point I shall expand on in a moment) since language interacts with cultural meaning;
4. Hence, the teacher can only provide the tokens of the language, but the learners themselves must experience and create the process of negotiation and value-creation.

Discussion

Let me illustrate the basic problem with a metaphor. When we go to a new country we have to use a new currency. We can easily learn the basic tokens of the currency – the number of cents in a dollar, colloquial terms like "dime", "quarter" and "nickel", the sizes of coins and the denominations of the notes. But knowing these does not enable us to operate the currency satisfactorily. To do this we have to achieve some sense of the values of the foreign culture – which goods are scarce, which goods are highly prized, what their role is in the culture. And this is not simply a matter of translation. Wine in a wine-drinking culture has a different price from wine in Britain, and also means perhaps a different quality of product when it is freely available – in some ways its value equivalent in Britain may be milk, though not exactly. The point is that to operate the currency of the foreign country we need a vast range of subtle intuitions so that we know at once whether the price asked is high or low, so that we can feel instinctively for a small ten-cent piece rather than a large five-cent one, so that we can immediately react to prices without always translating back into our home currency. I do not know in Canada whether five dollars is amazingly good value for a student concert, or expensive, and I cannot fluently operate the Canadian currency until I have acquired a vast range of intuitions which can only be obtained through experience of spending money in Canada. *But*, I can bring to Canada experience of spending money, flexibly, in a range of other cultural settings, so that I am attuned to the possible risks and problems, and I could have had some simulated exchange activity before I came if the situation had been even more complicated (as it is with language) and my needs great enough.

The point I want to stress here is that language teaching traditionally has concerned itself solely or largely with teaching about the tokens of negotiation. This is a necessary preliminary to learning to negotiate, and it is of course the area where the teacher has most to contribute as teacher, for the teacher can give students access to the tokens of negotiation through the materials chosen, the syllabus organisation, and the much discussed and trained techniques of presentation and practice. But these techniques, together with the correction processes initiated by teachers, always rely on our knowledge of the idealised, static system of the language. To respond to the learner's need to experience language use we must develop techniques out of our experience of groupwork, game-playing, role play and simulation activities, extensive reading and even creative writing in order to offer students the chance to say what they have not been explicity taught to say, to express meanings that they have chosen themselves, and to adjust and adapt their language to that of those with whom they communicate. None of these processes is completely new to language teaching, so what is demanded is in no sense a major break with the traditions of the past, but it is important to emphasise that such activities must become central to language teaching, and not simply peripheral.

There is another reason for wanting classroom activity to be based on student needs for a substantial part of the time. This relates to my Base Point One. We know that people do learn languages, and we often, through our interaction with them as teachers, help them to do it. But the more we give them chances of using their own language in the performance of tasks which have been specified as lightly as possible by the teacher (always with the recognition that they must be tasks that they can at least begin to perform in the target language), the more likely they are to use their own level of language, rather than a hypothetical level we have decided ourselves to be appropriate for them, and the more likely they are to adopt strategies that feel comfortable and appropriate for them on the basis of their own experience. A tight hand by the teacher implies that we know how learners should learn. Often we do not, so a loose hand seems preferable.

We have a position, then, in which the teacher teaches the tokens of the language – that is, makes available to students the formal,

basic patterns of grammar and pronunciation, as well as important vocabulary items – perhaps by very traditional means. But this is only the preliminary move in the process of learning. The teacher must also allow students to assist their own process of internalisation by using the language as fluently as possible, that is by behaving with the inadequate English they have so far developed in the same way as they behave in mother tongue. Extensive reading, natural writing exercises, extensive listening, and natural conversation, all in formally inadequate English, will be necessary to assist this process. And while the teacher will correct on some occasions, for much of the fluency activity when the language is being used naturally, the teacher will only respond as a communicator, so that students have the chance to become autonomous users of such language as they have acquired. In this way a developing and negotiating, dynamic system is being used, and not a static one based on the alien knowledge of the textbook or teacher.

The relationship that the teacher has built with the class will thus become a crucial factor in the development of language use. But the techniques will be techniques which have a long history in language teaching, and the skills demanded of teachers will be the basic interaction skills that they have always been concerned to develop.

How, then does functional-notional discussion fit in to all this? First, it is important to say that communicative teaching *can* be based on grammatical, or any other kind of syllabus, providing the syllabus is not seen as a specification of everything that happens in class. The chance to perform communicatively, for example by small group discussion, in English, of the answers to traditional textbook exercises, is available to any class with any materials or type of syllabus. Similarly, it is perfectly possible to envisage a functional syllabus being taught uncommunicatively – if, for example, the teacher teaches all about possible functions and their realisations without providing either practice or the chance to experiment or use language uncontrolledly. Without a methodology that converts the static syllabus listings into dynamic language activity no syllabus can become communicative.

But a functional-notional syllabus does demand that teachers become sensitive to the range of possible things to be done in English, with the possible settings in which students could use language, and

the general constellations of meaning that may be required of them. Thus such a syllabus may help teachers in the choice of language activities to direct their work more precisely towards use, and may act as a checklist so that they can ensure that all major areas of language use have been covered. A grammatical syllabus can do none of these things in itself. However, if we join the experience of sophisticated users of grammatical syllabuses to the structure of functional-notional ones we shall arrive at a methodological solution to the dynamic needs of learners. Good teachers have always tried to make grammatical syllabuses dynamic. A functional syllabus is another tool for assisting this process. In addition to the procedures already referred to, techniques such as those in Maley and Duff (1978), Moskowitz (1978), and Ur (1981) will be useful. But in the last resort, we must rely on our accumulated experience and expertise as teachers.

To summarise: being communicative is as much or more a matter of methodology as of syllabus or materials, and methodology is something that teachers are uniquely qualified to contribute to. We should therefore be willing to use our expertise, to innovate, to improve, to inform each other, and to criticise. In this sphere we are experts insofar as we are teachers. The President of SPEAQ, in her opening remarks, told us that "to communicate is the beginning of understanding". There is wisdom in recognising that it is the beginning, the beginning of a language process that we can start but cannot finish. As teachers we can set people off on the track of language extension and development, but we have to allow them to continue the process themselves.

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